

Figurative Language

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LITERARY study teaches us to pay close attention to language. With poetry especially, we base our interpretive efforts on the assumption that the closer we look at a poem's language, the fuller it will come into its force. More specifically, many interpretations focus on figures of speech—similes and metaphors, metonymys and personifications. Understanding how such figures work allows us to bring out into the open what a poem suggests. In this way and in others we are involved in the process of producing the poem's meanings. The figurative process—that is, the mental work that interpreting figures requires—is complex, and it is not limited to poetry; so our analysis of it will take us far and wide within an emerging theory of language and culture. But let's begin with a familiar poem—William Blake's "The Lamb"—and look at the figures of speech.

The Lamb

LITTLE Lamb, who made thee?

Dost thou know who made thee?

Gave thee life, & bid thee feed

By the stream & o'er the mead;

Gave thee clothing of delight,

Softest clothing, wooly, bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice,

Making all the vales rejoice?

Little Lamb, who made thee?

Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:

He is called by thy name,

For he calls himself a Lamb.

He is meek, & he is mild;

He became a little child.

I a child, & thou a lamb,
 We are called by his name.
 Little Lamb, God bless thee!
 Little Lamb, God bless thee!

This poem is deceptively simple. As one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, it is both a celebration and a critique of the clear, naive thinking of children. The poem's speaker is a child talking to a lamb, giving it a lesson in theology. Both the lamb and the child, the speaker explains, are products of the creative power of Christ, the prime symbol of innocence. Christ and lamb and child share a moral quality; they are part of a structure of meaning which Christ verified by becoming a child and taking on the name of the lamb. The simple language of the poem reinforces the child's innocent insight. There are only basic sentence patterns and common words, appropriate to the age and attitude of the speaker. In fact, the poem's language is so simple that it is often included in anthologies of poems for children. I've even seen the poem in a religious gift shop, reprinted on a card tied by a ribbon to a little toy lamb. From this innocent view "The Lamb" is a reassuring reminder of God's goodness and of the simple innocence which God grants the child. But one way in which the poem is not simple is in its figurative language. The simple vocabulary of the poem is enmeshed in a system of figures of speech which complicate the poem and suggest meanings beyond those the child intends. But before I look closely at those figures, I want to examine briefly the process by which we make sense of figurative language in general.

The traditional meaning of "figurative" has always involved a contrast with the "proper" meaning of a word, its supposed rightful meaning, the idea which comes directly to mind when the word is used. The utterance "tiger," for example, evokes for English speakers the familiar image of a large, predatory cat. But the word is not always used in this "proper" sense. A sportscaster might call a football player a "tiger on defense." On hearing such a phrase, any user of the language will immediately realize that the proper meaning can't work—there is no real tiger with claws and sharp teeth on the field. Instead, we realize that the phrase is being used figuratively to suggest the player's aggressiveness and speed. All in a moment we work it out that the tiger and the player are both elements in a mental category, "aggressive things," so that it is appropriate to transfer a characteristic of the tiger to the player by means of the figurative phrase. Now if this analysis seems too obvious, that's because I'm trying to articulate the logical steps that we accomplish in an intuitive flash. Figures of speech twist the meaning of a word—the Greek word for figures is *trope*, which means "turn, twist"—but they are so common in everyday language that the process of interpreting them occurs almost unconsciously, like any frequently repeated skill.

In reading the first stanza of "The Lamb," we must perform this procedure

repeatedly. Perhaps the most obvious example is the speaker's description of the lamb's wool as "clothing." The "proper" meaning of "clothing" clearly doesn't apply to the lamb. Wool is part of the lamb's body, not something added over it for warmth and beauty, as clothing is. And because this meaning obviously does not apply, we have to ask what elements of the meaning of "clothing" do apply to the lamb's wool. It keeps him warm; it gives him beauty. It makes the lamb seem almost human, as it does seem to the child, who doesn't think of the differences between himself and the lamb but, rather, of the category they share as god's creatures. And since they are both innocent, their god must also be innocent, Jesus the Lamb of God. What the child does not see is that it is his own figure of speech which has made the lamb seem human. The category he shares with the lamb is one that *he* has created. A similar process is going on in the lines "Gave thee such a tender voice, / Making all the vales rejoice?" In this figure, the echo of the lamb's call is said to "rejoice," thus describing the valleys and by extension the entire natural world as if they were capable of response. The speaker lives in a natural world which his figures have given a human dimension, a world which seems to reflect the innocence of the speaker.

The stanza also includes a less obvious set of figures which describe the god who created this innocent world. This god *gives* the lamb its life, its clothing, its "tender voice." He *bids* the lamb to feed on the gift of food he has provided for his creatures. It twists and stretches the "proper" meaning of these words to think of the lamb's wool as a gift or its food as a banquet set out as if for guests. But the speaker wants to suggest that god is a giver of gifts, a host, and that the lamb and the speaker are therefore in the hands of a benevolent power. The speaker uses these figures to construct an image of god which fits the poem's benign natural world.

But these figures reveal a much more complex and sophisticated theology at work than the speaker has in mind. Instead of the innocent and simple god that he seems to want, the figures of speech point to a powerful if benevolent being who allows the lamb and the child to continue in their innocence. Such a god is not as innocent as the child seems to think; the child's sense of god is not equal to the divine complexity. The speaker's own language seems to undo him, to suggest an image of god more complicated than the innocent child can grasp. Blake is taking us beyond the speaker's awareness into a realization that we create our own images of god. And the poem emphasizes this point by forcing the reader to share the creation of its meaning. In my own figurative process, the figures seem to me to point to a powerful god, which for me does not fit the image of innocence that the speaker desires. For me, any being who wields power has passed out of innocence, so that the speaker seems limited in his ability to perceive god. My construction of the poem's meaning is in excess of the "proper" meaning of the words and of the speaker's intentions. Any reader who engages in the figurative process will produce this excess. The full meaning of

the figure cannot be kept within safe limits: it proliferates as a function of its implied invitation to the reader.

Because figures of speech are so important in poetry and in all forms of discourse, they have been studied and categorized frequently throughout our cultural history. One of the meanings of the word “rhetoric” is the study of figures. (One of the others, rhetoric as the study of persuasion, we will get to later.) Rhetorical systems have frequently been constructed, giving names to a bewildering array of “turns” that can be given to the “proper” meanings of words. I want to name and briefly define only a few of the most important of these *kinds* of figures.

The figure of speech that most closely resembles the general definition I’ve given is *metaphor*, which many critics think of as the master, or central, figure. A metaphor, such as the “clothing of delight” from “The Lamb,” involves a transfer of meaning from the word that properly possesses it to another word which belongs to some shared category of meaning. A metaphor is therefore a compressed analogy. “Clothing” is to humans as wool is to lambs. And since there is an analogy here that we can accept, some of the meanings of “clothing” can transfer to the lamb’s wool.

Another important kind of figure illustrated in this stanza is *personification*. In this figure the characteristics of a human subject are transferred to an inhuman object. The poem’s description of the echo as the valley’s rejoicing is an obvious example. For the child speaker of the poem this is a key figure, because it produces for him a harmonious and peaceful natural world, one which his loving god has created for him so that his innocence will be maintained.

In fact, the entire poem is built on a figure of speech, *apostrophe*. An apostrophe is a speech directed at an object or being which cannot respond to or even hear the speech. It fits our general definition of “figure” in that it creates an unreal speech situation, so that the very act of speech is twisted, taken out of its “proper” function. Apostrophe is a form of personification. It assumes for the imaginative moment that the object shares our human ability to respond to speech. When the child speaks to the lamb, he implies that the lamb can understand him.

Of course not all of the figures of speech that critics have identified appear in this poem. Some others of note are simile and metonymy. A *simile* is a comparison of terms. Unlike metaphor, which requires the reader to do the work of constructing a logic of categories and analogies, a simile states explicitly that two terms are comparable and often presents the basis for the comparison. “Her lips were red as wine” does not leave the reader with the work that a metaphor requires. The simile is therefore in general a more controlled figure than metaphor, producing less excess of meaning. *Metonymy* accomplishes its transfer of meaning on the basis of associations that develop out of specific contexts rather than from participation in a structure of meaning. A metonymy such as referring to the

king by the phrase “the crown” speaks of the king by means of an object frequently associated with him. It does not call for the magical sharing of meaning that a metaphor implies; instead, it relies on connections that build up over time and the associations of usage. It is therefore not surprising that there is no metonymy in this poem. The speaker is not simply claiming that the lamb and the child and Christ have come to be associated with one another by convention or by usage but, rather, that they share a deep identity. Metonymy places us in the historical world of events and situations, whereas metaphor asserts connections on the basis of a deep logic that underlies any use of words.

Returning now to “The Lamb,” we might observe that if the first stanza of the poem is filled with vivid “figures of speech,” the second seems starkly literal—all the words are used in their “proper” sense. It is as though the imaginative child of the first stanza had grown into a direct, truth-telling prophet who speaks “properly” in the name of god. This stanza does, after all, give the answers, the true answers, to the questions of the first stanza. It identifies the “maker” of the lamb as Jesus and tells the lamb that it shares this identity in that Jesus adopted the name of the lamb. The absence of obvious figures makes this stanza more direct, but there are still several complications. First of all, this “literal” stanza describes the creation of a figurative category. It tells the story of how Christ’s deliberate actions—becoming a child, calling himself a lamb—establish the relationships that make the poem’s metaphors possible. That is, even though the words of the stanza are used in their “proper” sense, they ask readers to think in terms of the figurative process. We are being taught to think, that is, by categories and analogies.

Furthermore, when examined once again, the stanza is not as free of figures as it seems. Its words could be called “primal.” They are names for basic human actions and simple objects: “tell,” “call,” “become,” “bless,” “lamb,” “child.” But each of these words has a richness of implication that is produced by figures which occur within its “proper” meaning. (I know that’s a contradiction in the terms I’ve set up, but I’ll explain.) Each of these words has an interesting history which reveals that the words have figurative force. The most amazing example is “bless,” which derives historically from the word “blood.” To “bless” is to cleanse by a ritual sprinkling of blood. Now, surely, most of us are unaware of that aspect of the meaning when we use “bless,” but the fact remains that the word is a figure of speech in which some of the meanings of “blood” are transferred to the purifying action. This is remarkably apt to the poem, in that one of the chief links between the lamb and Christ is that both are the victims of blood sacrifice.

Other simple words in the stanza reveal a figure within their “proper” meaning. “Meek” and “mild,” for example, are words that now describe emotional states, personal characteristics. But both words have a history of reference to the tactile, sensory world—both at one time meant “soft, slippery.” The modern

meanings are a trope on these earlier meanings. What was once physical has been humanized, turned into the figurative terms of a psychology.

These passive, soft terms “meek” and “mild” create a complex image of Christ in combination with the more powerful figure of Christ the maker. Significantly, the history of “make” derives from the function of kneading, pressing; that is, what would be done to a meek and mild substance. Is Christ the maker of the figure or, is he the “meek and mild” material that gets shaped? The poem’s figurative language here suggests both. He has the power to shape himself, to choose his own figure (“he calls himself a Lamb”). The powerful “maker” chooses to take on the name and the gentle quality of the innocent lamb. In this sense the poem becomes a story about the figurative process, in which Christ in an act of poetic creation produces the figurative link, Christ—Lamb—child, which the child takes to be natural and inevitable. To the child, the world simply *is* innocent. But when we attend to the figures of the poem, that innocence shows itself to be a function of the figures, a production of the child’s language. Even the words that seem to be used in their “proper” sense exert a figurative force, shaping the world that the child perceives.

As a general principle, then, I would argue that the figurative history of a word is a part of its meaning and is therefore appropriate to a poetic interpretation whether or not the poet was aware of or intended it. These figures are the language’s own contribution to the meaning of the poem. That is, if even the “proper” meaning of words are in this sense figurative, then the complexity of communication in a poem is not only a product of the poet’s inventiveness but also a result of the interaction of tropes built into the language. These tropes bring out possibilities of meaning that preexist the poem in language, in the meaning structures that make tropes possible. The clearest example in “The Lamb” is the fact that the entire poem is based on the old personification of the lamb as innocent. This is a figure that Blake did not create but which has been part of our language for centuries. In this sense, the meaning of a poem is made possible by the systems of language by which whole cultures make sense of experience, and we now need to move to that level—from the poem to the systems which make it possible—if we are to understand the full impact of figurative language.

One consequence of our analysis is that the opposition between “proper” and “figurative” has come into question. Figures seem to be infiltrating the defenses of rightful meaning. If the “proper” meaning is itself a trope on an earlier meaning, then the poetic figure of speech is only a spectacular example of something all language does. Figures ask the reader to think in terms of a complex system of categories and analogies in order to make sense of them; but so does any use of language. How does any word make sense? It makes sense by being a part of a system of meanings, a set of contrasts and comparisons. No word has meaning

in isolation but only insofar as it relates to and differs from other words in the language system. "Bless" is not "curse," but both are part of a system of words that refers to the act of calling on god. Each of these words makes sense because it is the opposite of the other and because both participate in a category of meaning. The word "bless" means "the act of purification" only because it is part of a system of sound and meaning. There is no natural connection (one might say "proper" connection) between the word and the idea but only an agreement among speakers of the English language that "bless" *shall refer* to that act in the world. Even when there is no strongly figurative etymology, meaning is figurative in the sense that it relies on categories and associations. Language is thus not a simple process of naming preexisting objects and states but a system through which we give meaning to the world. Instead of imagining "bless" as the name that is proper to the act, think of the act as what the word figures, gives form to, makes sense of. There is no "proper" meaning, only arbitrarily "assigned" meaning. And therefore all the complexities that "figures of speech" create in a poem are part of any use of language. Just as the figures of "The Lamb" construct the world that the speaker perceives, so language produces the set of meanings by which we shape reality.

Now if language gives meaning to experience, we have to think of it as the system in which our ideas become possible. Language is a conceptual grid, a system of values, through which we experience reality. In our culture both male and female children grow up learning, for example, that a girl fits into the same figurative category as chick, cat, bitch, and fox. And it is then very hard for any of us to think of the feminine outside these figurative categories. Some psychologists still talk about how women are essentially passive and soft unless their "femininity" is somehow denied and they turn, as a result, peevish and overaggressive. Clearly the psychological theory is in a sense a "reading" of this figurative category. It may be bolstered by studies and statistics, but the theory still depends on biases and value systems built into the language. Figurative systems of this kind are repeated so frequently that they cease to strike us as figures and take on, instead, some of the power of the "proper," as though the figurative system that surrounds the feminine were logical and natural. We come to think by means of figures worn smooth, made invisible. How hard it is to remember that the association female = chick, so casually used in our language, is an arbitrary assignment of meaning, one that has consequences for human behavior. Because of such forgetfulness, we put cultural biases and even clichés into play when we think, unless we reflect on the power of our language.

Figures play a powerful role even in areas of thought which are suspicious of figures, such as philosophy and science. Many philosophers and scientists hold very strongly to the proper/figurative distinction. For them, each idea should have a proper name, so that experience and data can be interpreted accurately. Yet figures of all kinds permeate philosophical and scientific thought. When phi-

losophers talk about “congruence” or scientists praise the “elegance” of a theory, they are using tropes. Even such basic philosophical terms as “idea” have a figurative history—“idea” derives from the Greek word for “to see.” As Paul de Man says, “As soon as one is willing to be made aware of their epistemological implications, concepts are tropes and tropes concepts” (in Sacks 1978, 21). The desire behind the idea of the concept, of course, is that concepts are derived from experience, but if concepts are tropes, then our categories create the shape of experience—they define what we agree to be true. The systems of meaning and value that make figures possible also produce our way of looking at the world.

Recent psychological theory also points to a powerful role for figures in the unconscious. Students of rhetoric have long realized that figures exert a more than rational influence on readers. One reason is that the unconscious processes material in a figurative manner. When Freud was trying to explain how the meaning of a dream was disguised or transformed, he described two functions—“identification” and “displacement”—which sound a lot like metaphor and metonymy. Because we cannot face unconscious material directly, dreams must transform that material into a form that we can accept. In “identification,” an idea is associated with another in the same structure of meaning (as in metaphor); whereas, in “displacement,” meaning is transferred to an idea or object related by association (as in metonymy). If in our dreams we are trying to come to terms with the death of a loved one, we might dream of being lost or of becoming separated from someone in a crowd. These are metaphorical transformations of grief, in that death is the ultimate form of loss or separation. All these experiences are part of the same meaning structure. On the other hand, we might dream of being in a church, or in a black car, or of wearing a black suit, all details experientially related to funerals and the rites of death. In this case we create a metonymy in which these details stand in for the fear of death that we cannot face directly. What these processes suggest is that figurative activity is deeply rooted in all our mental life and that poetic figures can bring us into contact with powerful psychological forces.

If all levels of thought are figurative, the power in the act of perception and understanding seems to lie in language. The image we’ve been developing seems to depict a passive world, to which humans give shape through language. But language is not an independent, all-powerful entity. It is part of the fabric of social and political life. It shapes our perceptions, but it also *is shaped by* its social context. That is, because of its strategic role in perception, language must be shaped to serve the needs of dominant groups. To return to an earlier example, the figurative system female = bitch = fox = chick = kitten = etc. is not the only possible way of thinking about women; but the associations force themselves on us because they serve a powerful interest, the interest of men who want to dominate women. This figurative system has rhetorical and political force.

Students of rhetoric as far back as the classical Greeks have realized that figures

have force. They are the chief feature of eloquence, the ability to convince an audience of the truth of an argument. Figures convince, though, not by a strictly logical presentation but by an appeal to the irrational, the part of the mind that delights in their multiple meanings and deep reassurances. Figures reassure our belief in dominant systems of thought in that they rely on accepted categories and analogies. In this sense figures appeal to our desire to possess an untroubled, self-evident truth. We want to believe that our way of thinking is the only sensible one, and figures reassure us by taking the system for granted, as a field which allows free play within its secure boundaries.

A powerful example of eloquence in our culture is advertising, which uses figurative thinking very extensively. In TV advertising the figures are usually expressed visually rather than verbally, but the same mental function is called into action. Two images that belong to the same category are connected to each other so that emotional qualities of one will transfer to the other. An example: a series of commercials for a new McDonald's hamburger relies on very strong metaphorical associations. This new burger is packaged in such a way that the hot meat is kept separate from the crisp lettuce, tomato, and cheese. This modest improvement in package design is the focus of an incredibly intense set of figurative practices. The problem with the new design (and the reason there's a need for all this rhetorical effort) is that the eater has to put the sandwich together without making a mess. The crisp stuff has to be raised, turned over, and flipped on to the meat. What the commercials do is to associate by visual crosscutting this "coming together of what's been kept apart" with human, sentimental reunions—a kid and a dog, two staggering skaters, even Romeo and Juliet. Thus the warmth, humor, and emotion of the human contacts cross over to the act of assembling the sandwich. If this seems like heavy emotional freight for a new package design, the intensity of the ads suggests that something big is at stake. The viewer may shout, "Give us a break, it's just a new box," but the association is nevertheless a visual reality, a figure that we ourselves have helped to produce. The use of the figure makes us active participants in the meaning of the visual association. The ad is therefore more effective in appealing to our emotion. We have to compare the images, find the category they belong in (reunions), and work out the analogy that makes the metaphor possible. We do this, of course, very easily. The categories are right to hand, reassuringly reliable in constructing a sensible metaphor. This commercial therefore succeeds on two levels. It accomplishes the emotional association it sought, so that we feel positively toward the product. And more profoundly, it reinforces our reliance on culturally powerful systems of thought and feeling. It makes us use them, and they work smoothly for our comprehension.

More overtly political examples are rampant these days. Many commercials associate products with the Statue of Liberty or with the flag, giving the impression that the product delivers the kind of freedom that we associate with these

political symbols. But even an apparently nonpolitical example like the McDonald's ad serves political power in that it reinforces an accepting rather than critical attitude toward systems of meaning. Figures are therefore open to manipulation by those who have access to powerful forms of discourse.

But if figures of speech rely on an accepted system of thought, they also reveal to the critical reader that it *is* a system, that it is *not* a simple reflection of reality. Some figures of speech, particularly those in poetry, call attention to themselves, ask us to think very carefully about how they mean what they mean. Saying that an echo is a valley's joyful response to a lamb's voice risks making no sense unless the reader enters into a productive effort, thinking "echo" can be a "rejoicing" only if nature has a spirit capable of joy, a human quality that connects it to us, which is what the speaker wants to believe and communicate. We are relying here on a kind of mythic category, one which common sense would tell us is nonsensical—after all, echoes do not feel joy. A figure like this therefore reminds us that the system which makes it possible is itself the product of human thought. Figures of speech, especially spectacular ones, are potential weaknesses in the system, places where its workings are visible, places that remind us that our truths are not self-evident. Spectacular figures can attune us to the almost invisible figures at work throughout language and culture, and thus to the power of language over perception.

But what to do with that awareness? If our thinking always occurs within a system, are we condemned to repeat what the system imposes? Figures of speech, of course, are not the only way to bring systems of thought into question. Victims of political, economic, or sexual power often acquire by harsh experience the kind of skepticism I'm promoting. But the advantage of focusing on figures in this critical way is that it places language at the center of our attention, just as language plays a central role in the enforcement of all those forms of power. Language and culture provide us with ways of thinking about ourselves and our experiences. And any political or social program must come to terms with the power of language if it is to affect our lives deeply.

Figures and the systems they imply should not, however, be condemned as brainwashing techniques by which those in power control our thoughts and feelings. Figures and systems are inevitable in any use of language and are not the exclusive property of those in power. In fact, our culture is not one unified system but rather consists of competing systems of thought, each with its own set of possible figures. McDonald's associates constructing its new burger with the pleasures of human reunions; one could create a countermetaphor in which computer people consume integrated circuit sandwiches. Figurative language is a set of systems open to play. The possibilities for combination are not limited to those with which we're familiar, and the value systems they imply need not be those currently in power.

Let me conclude by returning to figures of speech in poetry. I've been calling

them “spectacular” figures, using that word to suggest that they differ from ordinary language not because they are figurative but because they are visibly so. Two of the great benefits of poetry are the pleasure of meditating on these challenging, rich figures and the insight that they provide into the power of language itself. Of course, figures can be used to mislead or to enforce questionable values, but they can be—and are daily—used to question those values and to oppose them with new systems of thought and value. If figures tell us anything, it’s that meaning is up for grabs, that the world can be shaped in an endless variety of forms, that language is a battleground of value systems. The challenge of figures is to make sure we are aware of their presence in discourse and their effects on our thought—but also to engage in the production of figures ourselves, in service of our own values.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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